

Issue 25

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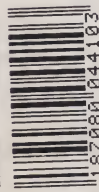
INFILTRATION

the zine about going places you're not supposed to go

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Military Leftovers

The Many Charms of Military Leftovers

by Ninj and Liz

THOSE EXPLORERS AMONG US who love a challenge, or a blast tunnel, can't deny their attraction to the secretive spectres of military leftovers. These abandoned bunkers, fortresses, missile silos, fallout shelters, hospitals, and plain old bureaucratic offices were designed with the highest security of their day, and were often engineered to be impregnable. In many cases, their very existence was kept secret.


Military projects tend to be compelling in their magnitude as well. The military thinks big and spends big, and old military developments are often designed and filled with items that defy the ordinary human sense of proper scale. These supersized wonders are often buried deep underground and out of sight.

But most of all, what the military leaves behind when it moves on is often not just a structure but a souvenir of a political climate — a physical record of a troubled time, a glimpse at what might've been. Much like abandoned mental hospitals and sanitariums, the tangible evidence of fear, secrecy and desperation lingers in these sites —

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though in this case they live eerily alongside the rubble of scientific discovery and ingenuity. There's just something about being inside a nuclear missile silo or an abandoned air force base that gives you that creepy sensation that can only

come from a space once devoted to killing as many people as possible as quickly as possible. Shelters, on the other hand, are disturbing in the opposite way, conjuring images of lives being desolately measured out by careful rations while the world above is beset by unthinkable horror.

From Alaska to the Maginot Line to the South Pole, military leftovers are strewn across our landscape, full of mystery and enticement. Though the decommissioning of many of these sites could be construed as a good thing — the world is hopefully further away from the mutually assured destruction of nuclear war than it once was — military leftovers continue to serve roles for us not just as thrilling places to explore but as calling cards from the past, left to remind us of the future that might've been and warn us of what might yet be. 

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"The idea of all-out nuclear war is unsettling."
—Walter Goodman

Infiltration is published occasionally. Please send submissions and feedback to: Infiltration, PO Box 13, Station E, Toronto, ON, M6H 4E1. Website: www.infiltration.org. E-mail: ninj@infiltration.org, liz@infiltration.org. Cover: A blast tunnel inside the abandoned and restored Diefenbunker in Carp, Ontario.

Letters

Cape Spencer Lighthouse

The Cape Spencer lighthouse is a US coast guard lighthouse that was probably built sometime in the 30s or 40s. It was manned by coast guard crews until sometime in the 80s when most of the lighthouses around Alaska were automated. This one has a short, square tower topped by a round light room, under which is a square building where the crews lived. On the same rock as the lighthouse are a helicopter pad, a boathouse, and a crane used to launch boats, as well as some radio towers and telecom trailers.

I'd had my eye on this for a while. My first attempts to kayak to the rock failed. I finally got a chance to go with two other people who had an inflatable skiff. We got dropped off by a larger boat near the lighthouse rock and rowed in, landing on a ledge below the cliffs and hauling the skiff up above the tideline.

After climbing the cliff, the first building we looked at was the crane winch house. There was no dock here, so crews had to launch boats with the crane and pick them up the same way. At the top was a platform to put the boats on with a boathouse and tram rails on which the boats could be slid into the boathouse. When we looked in there we found that the boats were gone and there were only some tools and lumber. An old sign recommended safe and courteous behavior for visitors and warned that visiting privileges could be revoked. (There were a few humorous signs like this, my favorite was "Goggles must be worn while operating this machine" posted over the toilet.)

The tram rails led up a boardwalk past the helipad to the main lighthouse. Previous visitors had told me that nothing was locked up, so

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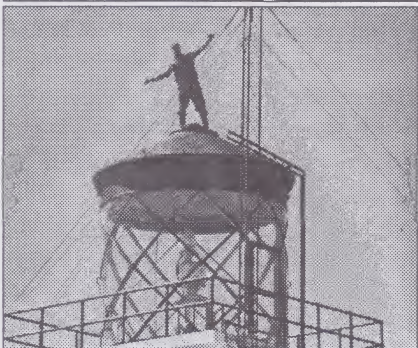
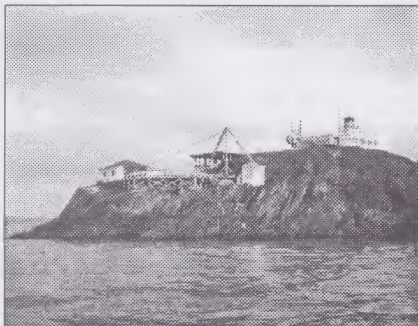
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we entered the lighthouse by the front door. As we came through the first door into the entryway I could hear a beeping noise from inside, but there were no alarm sensors on the door so we decided it was something else. The second door did have a magnetic sensor on it, and when we got in we found the following sign: "Welcome to the Cape Spencer Lighthouse, when you entered an alarm was activated and a response team was notified. You are trespassing on government property. If you are in distress, a radio, food, and water are (locations given). Damage to equipment can result in a \$250,000 fine." We located the source of the beeping as a carbon monoxide detector, and since the last visitor a few days ago hadn't caused a response we figured the alarm wasn't hooked up.

The main room we came to first was the lounge, with couches and tables, a kitchen, and some paintings and maps on the walls. Three bedroom/offices were off to one side, and the bathroom, a storage room, and an electronics room were on the other side. There was a surprising amount of stuff left: food, magazines, files and papers, bedding and clothes in the lockers (along with graffiti from the crews about how much the place sucked). In the back were the generators and a stairway leading up and down.

We ascended the rough concrete stairs, which were in poor condition, up to a square room filled with National Weather Service electronics, and then up a spiral staircase to the glassed-in light room. The light itself



The lighthouse island from sea; a dangerous to operate toilet; the view from the tower out to the Pacific and a pose atop the lighthouse tower.

was a new addition, the original rotating mechanism being rusted solid in a shaft which led all the way through the structure. The lens on the new light was spinning slowly but the light wasn't on (it was daytime). A video camera was duct-taped to the window, pointing out towards the fishing grounds (probably to monitor the sea conditions for the weather service).

After getting some photos up in the tower, we went down to check out the basement. In the basement we found a pool table complete with cues and balls, and some graffiti that looked like it had been done with the cue chalk. More miscellaneous equipment like portable generators and cans of fuel and paint were down here, but mostly it was empty. Parts of the basement were floored with the natural rock of the island, which was very uneven in places, but most of it was a concrete floor.

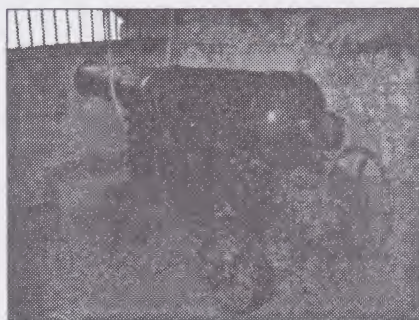
We finally decided we'd seen everything and returned to our boat, launched off the cliff SEAL team, and left without encountering the mythical response team which would probably take at least an hour to get there by helicopter anyway. —*Freak*

Under Gibraltar

Some years ago I was serving in the British Army and was posted in Gibraltar. Beneath the rock there is a massive underground tunnel system; I suppose most of it was developed in response to the need to house an army for the invasion of North Africa. It is my understanding that there are more than 26 miles of highway beneath the ground plus hospitals, accommodations and facilities to

house over 30,000 people for an extended period of time.

One night while feeling a little bored some friends and I climbed the scree hill behind the barracks across the property of the governor's house and up to a concrete pillbox. We climbed through the concrete observation slot and found ourselves in a room that had obviously been built to observe the fall of the rounds from the huge guns on the top of the cliff. It was from there that we accessed the entire underground system.

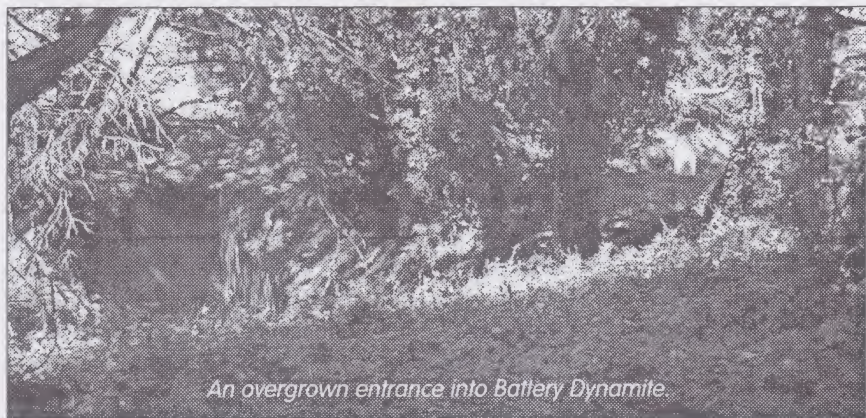


Underground tunnels and fortifications go deep below the rock of Gibraltar.

When the army left for North Africa the tunnels were closed and few had entered prior to us. At the bottom of a deep stairway I found a light bulb that had been burning for some 40 years; I touched it and it winked out. In one tunnel we climbed a metal ladder and it took us up to a tiny observation post in the thick thorn bushes above the town. I am sure nobody knew of its existence. —*Mick*

Battery Dynamite

Battery Dynamite is one of the many installations at the Presidio of San Francisco. Until 1994, the Presidio was a military base. When I lived



An overgrown entrance into Battery Dynamite.

there, my Dad was working for the Sixth Army Headquarters. A tour was given of Battery Dynamite for officers and some military historians, and I got to tag along with my Dad.

Congress built this thing back in the 19th century despite the Army saying it was worthless. Basically, these huge cannons could shoot big barrels of dynamite way out to sea, blowing up any ships that could attack the port. This was never used, and was totally stupid. It was that day's version of the Missile Defense Shield.

After seeing only a little bit of this place with my Dad, I knew I had to go back and see the whole thing for myself. So I found some holes in the fence and got friends to go in with me. The place is a labyrinth. In some places we found evidence of others infiltrating the place: some candles in a room with a pentagram on the floor and some animal skeletons, a pile of Foster's oilcans, used syringes, and various prescription bottles.

We found lots of cool ladders leading to different portholes all over the place, coming out on top of the ivy-covered hill made by the Battery, surrounded by eucalyptus trees

planted back when the place was built. There were some neat turret areas where I guess cannons were placed, and great views of the Pacific.

I have really fond memories of this place, because in 9th grade I was universally picked on. But once people heard I was taking people into this place, a lot more people wanted to be my buddy so that I would take them in to look around. —A/ex

Under Morzine

When I was 16 (I'm 24 now), I went on a skiing trip to Morzine in the French Alps. Morzine is a town perched on top of 150 foot walls. The area underneath the town is riddled with catacombs, tunnels, big chambers, doors, etc. all dating to medieval times which adds to the atmosphere.

My mate Iain and I (fuelled by the lax French alcohol laws) explored these as much as we dared by the light of two Zippos. I'll admit that it got to the stage where we were holding hands, it got that eerie. As we stepped into one chamber a figure (I'm guessing a tramp) stood up and to be frank, we shat ourselves and ran in pitch black, stumbling all the way out. —Ed

Griffiss Air Force Base

by Remingtonius

ONE AFTERNOON WHILE camping near Rome, New York, I "Red Celled" Griffiss Air Force Base, a former Strategic Air Command B-52 bomber base.

Although there are still many USAF research laboratories there, it is no longer open to regular air operations. It was closed as part of the Force Reduction Program at the end of the Cold War. In an effort to preserve the vast capital spent on the place and to stimulate business, some buildings were turned over to large and small civilian corporations at below market rate rents (local landlords and real estate folks must have loved that!) in 1995. It is now called the Griffiss Business and Technology Park.

What a huge area! Almost 4,000 acres huge. The on-base housing area alone was larger than many rural towns. At one time it had its own schools, ice rink, theatre, fire department, bus system, golf course and bowling alley.

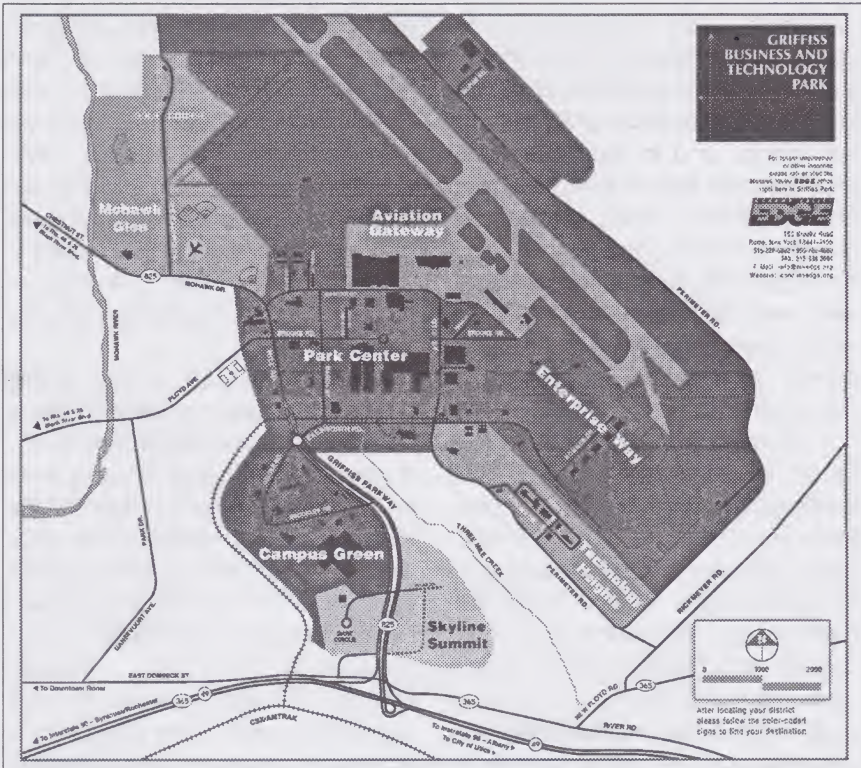
Most of the buildings on base not being used by venture capitalists remain sealed up, and armed Airforce security details make frequent but rather unmotivated vehicle patrols in discreetly painted SUVs.

I suspect local teenagers had pioneered (busted open) the vent shafts, fire escapes, and other routes into buildings that I used when the place was first shut down, but they seem to have lost interest quickly, as there was surprisingly little evidence of damage, graffiti or partying.

I visited the abandoned ord-

nance bunker farm on the newly named Enterprise Road first. This site, where bombs and other munitions were kept, took up a fair-sized piece of real estate, and featured row after row of giant concrete and earthen bunkers with their heavy blast-proof doors yawning open to beckon curious interlopers like me inside. There must have been at least 30 bunkers within the earthen berm that covered the farm on three sides.

The entrance to the bunker area was previously the site of heavy security precautions. The main component of this security was a thick-walled blockhouse equipped with steel firing ports, THICK bulletproof glass and an elaborate fencing system. This mini fortress was constructed to withstand some serious fighting and provide hyper security. Workers had to go through a zigzag maze of barbed wire gates and security turnstiles to get in or out. They were also apparently obliged to present themselves (probably for an ID check and a photo comparison) to a guard behind the thick glass. Peering in through one window I could see an empty rifle rack that once held about 15 rifles standing on their butts. Pictures and notices still hung in their frames. At one time the building had its own generator in case the main power went out, and a hardened "sally-port" garage that enabled guard teams to enter and leave by vehicle without being seen. I think the inside of this place could have been accessed by bypassing the padlock on a heavy steel trap-



door entry to a steam tunnel (?) beside it, but I was travelling light and didn't have the tools.

Vehicles going into the bunker area had to go through three electronically controlled gates. A strangely incongruous item at the main entrance was a now-decrepit bus stop shelter at which the base transit system picked up and delivered workers. Although it was the same type of glass and aluminum shelter found in any city, the mental image of a person whistling and carrying a lunch pail as they got off a bus to go floss and polish nuclear bombs capable of toasting several large cities is just plain weird.

The bunkers themselves varied in sizes from those of about high

school gymnasiums all the way down to that of single car garages. The blast doors are something that really must be seen in order to be fully appreciated. Made from solid steel or steel and concrete, they are at least three feet thick in some cases. Most were big enough to allow special munitions -hauling tractors towing trailers inside. These behemoths really gave me the hee-bie-jeebies. It was easy to imagine the despair you would feel if somebody accidentally closed and locked them while you were inside the bunker: the creaking as the door moved, the narrowing sliver of daylight followed by the resounding thud as the door was seated home and then dogged shut...

What a cool experience to go inside these bunkers and see the old squadron emblems on the walls, the long defunct temp/humidity recording "clocks" and to read the graffiti penciled onto door frames, desktops etc. by bored airmen, techies and guards. It was a good thing I had a flashlight with me, as some areas were very dark. My mind swooned when considering the awesome firepower (conventional, nuke and chemical) once housed there.

Of the approximately five or 10 other conventionally constructed buildings within the bunker complex, there were only two that were insecure. One was a steam plant, and the other was (I think) a place that repaired air conditioning and dehydration machinery. These places were interesting enough in their own right, but were somewhat pedestrian compared to the other places at Griffiss that had distinctly military purposes.

My biggest coup was at a place that used to be the central "Aircrew Ready Complex". This was the high-security (mucho barbed wire atop 20-foot fences, multiple gates, cameras etc.) building where the bomber crews that were on immediate standby would stay while waiting for WW3 to start. It was right beside the concrete apron where fueled and loaded bombers once waited 24 hours a day in case the Reds got too pushy. Four large, long tunnels made from cement and corrugated metal led out of the place onto the tarmac. The doors at the end of the tunnels had crash bars on them to allow speedy exits. Standing there, I could

easily imagine the sirens moaning and the men running out of these tunnels to their waiting planes during alerts. I could almost see and hear them putting on their helmets, awkwardly running whilst tugging on their flying jackets and survival vests, all the while thinking of Slim Pickins in Dr. Strangelove: "This is it boys — nuclear combat, toe to toe with the Rooskies."

When I visited it was being cleaned up and converted into a National Guard administrative center. A gaggle of six bored Privates were in the first room to the right off the main entrance, leaning on their brooms and talking about porno flicks they had recently seen when I strolled in the front entrance. I had a notepad in hand and a camera (which I foolishly forgot to use) around my neck. They jumped and started yessir-ing me (a disheartening but in this case useful consequence of getting older). I'm sure they were scared stiff at being caught loafing and were wondering how much of their conversation I had heard. Taking advantage of their surprise, I straightforwardly explained I was a history writer (half-true) who was just looking around for a story. I also told them I was a former Army Reservist from Canada (true) and this resulted in an instantaneous relaxation amongst them. I said I wouldn't touch anything (fib; see below) and they gladly agreed to let me investigate the place without escort.

Wow. At least fifty rooms on two levels that were pretty much exactly as the Air Force had left them five years ago. Except for the occasional

cobweb and the pervasive dust and dankness, it was as if they had just shut the lights off and left at the end of the previous day. There were offices full of (empty) file cabinets, in/out trays, staplers, ashtrays, whirl boards, calendars, etc. Every room had a list of furniture and equipment contents posted on the door and in every example I checked the items listed were all present.

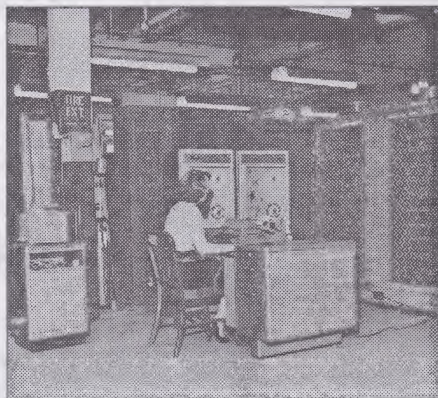
There was a dining room and kitchen that still had steam tables, stoves, industrial sized mixers and some large pots and other utensils. In the sub basement adjacent to the boiler room I found a weight room that still contained some rusty weights and a Nautilus machine.

The coolest room was a theatre complete with Cineplex-style chairs, big blackboards and a screen which I am sure was used to conduct "Tonight's mission is to bomb the ball-bearing plant in Stuttgart"-type briefings. Although the rooms still had power, there were some in which all the fluorescent tubes were now pooched. I had to explore much of this building, especially the bottom part, by Surefire flashlight.

I tried to find the stereotypically red-coloured phone whose secretly dreaded ring would send the bombers and their crews into the

skies on their deadly missions. I believe I found the room (the Ops Center) that would have had the phone in it, but all the communications stuff was stripped out of it. In fact, this one area was the most heavily cleaned-out in the whole building. Not much was left in it but partitions, desks, a few erasable organizational charts and lots of bare phone and computer cables.

I did manage to find a bunch of old maps in one desk drawer in another office. Most were for the areas surrounding other air bases and training ranges in the States, but one



When operational, Griffiss Air Force Base was a showcase of modern technology.

was for the entire central Midwest and East Coast. I snagged it. It has a route traced on it from Griffiss to a base in Michigan, with VERY detailed navigational legs printed on the back of it. I don't know how they did it from the altitudes I know B-52s flew at, but the waypoints are described in such minute details as "abcxy, center of hwy bridge", "abczy, north east corner of building" etc. Very cool.

As I was returning to the main floor to leave, I heard voices. Peeking around the corner I could see that the boss (an Army Major, no less!) of the six privates had just returned and was asking them about their progress with cleaning the place up. I knew I had to act fast before they

told him about me. After a very short pause to steel myself, I went around the corner and confidently walked straight up to the group.


Upon seeing me in my vacationing civilian attire, the Major's face suddenly dropped. I'm sure he was about to ask me who I was and what the hell I was doing there so I got in real close, thrust my hand out into his, looked him in the eye and said, "Nice place you have here, Major. Lots of potential for a first class admin center, huh? Leave it to the Air Force to overbuild things, right?" I started moving again, "Bye now, thanks fellas, don't work too hard, good luck," and walked out without looking back. I hope the privates didn't get in too much trouble for letting an unauthorized civilian run around the place.

I remain in awe of this place and what it once represented: noble efforts by brave men to defeat the threat of socialism and its miserable system of compulsion. Griffiss positively reeks of both sustained vigilance and the boredom that had to be endured by its inhabitants during long hours spent "on the line". It is a monument to the type of quality construction and designed redundancy that was only possible with the nearly unlimited budgets of the Cold War. Every taxpayer that ever felt ripped off, or any un-recovered hippie



Today Griffiss AFB has been converted into a privately held business park.

peace creep that still feels the "arms race" was merely a convenient fiction invented by the "military-industrial complex" should see this place. They will surely get a tangible knowledge of the deadly

seriousness with which the defense of North America was pursued. 

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A City Under One Roof

by Freak

WHILE SPENDING A summer in Anchorage I had the opportunity to visit one of the oddest towns in Alaska, and one of the biggest abandonments. Whittier was built in the 1940s as a secret military port, with the only land access by way of a 3-mile rail tunnel from the Alaska Railroad mainline to a protected harbor. At the start of the Cold War, military officials planned a large garrison for Whittier. Due to the lack of flat ground, this facility would consist of 10 huge self-contained buildings. Only two were ever built, one now housing most of the town's several hundred people, and the other vacant. Known locally

as the "city under one roof", the abandoned Buckner building was designed as a fully self-contained community, able to house, feed, entertain and supply a population of over 1,000 military personnel and family members. Both buildings were damaged in the 1964 earthquake, and the Buckner has sat

empty ever since.

I took the train over to Whittier on a weekend, planning to camp out overnight and do some kayaking as well as exploring. The weather turned out to be bad for boating, so most of the trip was spent exploring.

I first visited the Begich tower, where most of the town lives, to see if I could get on the roof or into the rumored service tunnels. I found this building very unfriendly, and downright spooky to hang around in. There were cameras everywhere, a kooky law against decorations, 50 years' worth of fried food smells and weird people (some of whom haven't left the building for years, since

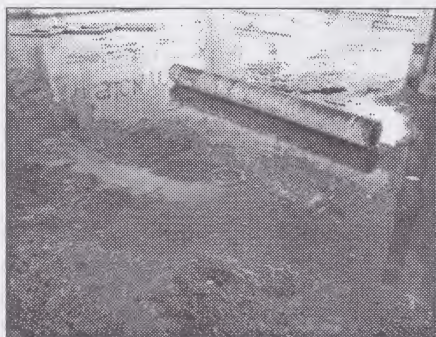
most of the city services and non-tourist businesses are built in).

I gave up on the occupied building after finding all interesting areas locked, and headed over to the abandoned Buckner building. My first foray was up to the top floor to stash my heavy pack in an elevator room, then I proceeded down



The Buckner Building, completed in 1953, was once the largest building in Alaska. It has sat abandoned since an earthquake in 1964.





Water and moss cover the floor in large sections of the Buckner building.

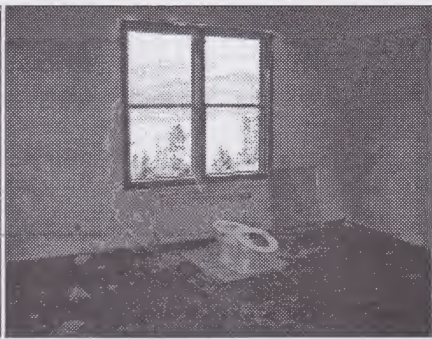
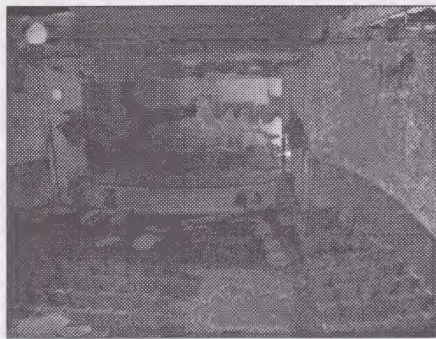
through each level. I tried to methodically examine the building, and after two days I think I'd seen everything, but the place is so extensive that it's possible I missed a few things. The "basement" is at ground level on the front and has exterior doors on three sides, and below that are several sub-basements and standing-height crawlspaces connected by small utility tunnels. Four elevators and four main stairways provide paths through the building, along with fire escapes at each end of the side wings that extend out from the main building. A large hallway runs down the centre of each floor serving as a main street of sorts, although in some of the areas reserved for officers this is blocked by double doors.

I found most of the interesting areas mentioned on websites and elsewhere, and saw that the place was not as "stripped" as I had somewhat expected. Most of the furniture was gone, but there were a lot of remaining bathroom fixtures, pipes and utilities, and built in fixtures like bars and kitchen equipment. I located the theater, restaurants, freight elevators, barber shop and stores,

school, jail cells, hospital, shooting range and bowling alley, but was unable to find the swimming pool, gym, or bank.

The vandalism was pretty heavy; almost every window was smashed and there was graffiti everywhere. A local confessed that his childhood was spent seeing who could throw a toilet the farthest from the rooftop. Water damage was also very extensive. All the roofs are flat, with raised lips that collect large ponds in some areas. The drain pipes are cracked and broken, letting water run down through the building and soak through every level. Decaying sheetrock makes a calcium sludge on the floors and creates stalactites and other cave-like deposits on the levels below. The elevators are all stalled on various floors; some of the doors have been pried open to reveal the dark shafts filled with water at the lowest level, and a few of the elevator cars have been broken into.

I searched for some rumored tunnels with at first little luck. The confusing web of utility passages and void spaces under the basement defy logic and leave lots of



A theatre once used for showing plays and movies and a throne with a view.


room for speculation, especially when crawling height tunnels can open into ballroom-size spaces with no standing-height access. I found one tunnel which seemed intended for public access by its size and the setup of stairways and handrails, but it was at the wrong end of the building away from the rest of the town. At the bottom a large cluster of pipes seemed to deny the public access idea. I later found that this was a steam tunnel from the demolished power plant.

Later, as I was sitting in a roof doorway sorting photos, I noticed two people walk out of the next penthouse, glance my way and continue across the roof to look at the view. They turned out to be a couple from Anchorage who were interested in abandoned buildings and tunnels, they'd even explored some of the same places I'd found in Fairbanks. I showed them the jail and some of the other rooms in the basement, but they didn't have boots and couldn't check out some of the wetter areas.

After doing some hiking and looking for tunnels in town, I went back to the Buckner and found a

place to camp in one of the upper rooms. I'd wanted to try the roof, but it was starting to rain and there were few dry areas. I found a dry protected spot on the fourth floor and secured the tent with a line to a support pillar and one to a heavy light fixture that had fallen from the ceiling.

During the day I'd had some odd feelings and gotten spooked a few times while alone in the darker areas and smaller sub-basements, once managing to smack my head open on a pipe while hearing things. The spooky vibes and asbestos orbs probably would have kept a mystery machine load of ghost hunters happy for weeks, but despite this I managed to get a good night's sleep. The next day was spent looking around the building a bit more, locating an obscure pipeline tunnel that parallels the rail tunnel, and catching the train back to Anchorage.

For more info on Whittier and the Buckner building, check out <http://freak.minimanga.com/whittier/> and <http://freak.minimanga.com/whittier2/whittier2.htm>, or e-mail freak20@email.com. 

The Hospital in the Hills

by Burzum

THE NAVAL VETERANS' hospital loomed at the edges of my imagination for almost two years before I jumped the fence.

It had been abandoned for more than a decade before I moved in to an apartment complex across the street from the sprawling, eighty-plus acre complex, which had begun to resemble a sort of feral parkland. Above the fences, fading signs and barbwire, the hospital's main building seemed untouched from the outside, as if it might reenter service any day now.

My partner Mr. Sleep and I had been exploring the hospital for over a year — working our way gradually into almost every building in the complex, including the abandoned power plant and the Nationally Historic Officer's Club. We had climbed up walls and chimneys, squeezed through narrow windows, and inched our way nervously across decaying roofs and stairwells. But the

main building remained a tough nut to crack, until one particular evening.

It was a warm night, with very little moonlight. We entered the grounds by our usual methods, a bit more apprehensive than was normal. I had sworn more than a year before, during my first trip, to one day reach the roof of the seemingly locked down hospital — and tonight we were slated to complete that goal.

We had scouted two potential routes on previous trips, and were now ready to try them. The first involved climbing down into an external ventilation system, which we hoped would connect underneath the parking lot to the basement of the hospital. The second involved dropping down into a sealed-off maintenance area to the side of the building, where it appeared that there might be access to the first story. After some considering, we decided to start with the ventilation system, given that it was more accessible.



Inside the naval veterans' hospital, the level of destruction went far beyond vandalism.

The ventilation complex consisted of two huge tubes, probably about eighteen feet in diameter, extending about six feet out of the ground, surrounded by a flat panel of grating extending in all directions. Both of the tubes proved to house huge fans, but the gratings on the top were sealed, preventing entry. This proved to be only a slight setback, however, since we managed to pry up a trapdoor entrance into the grating system, just large enough to allow me to crawl beneath it.

A few minutes of crawling beneath the gratings led me to the side of one of the fan housings, where a small hole had been cut into the concrete wall. I wriggled through it, and found myself about fifteen feet below the fan, on a concrete ledge that divided the space into quarters, suspended ten feet from the floor. I figured that this would be our way in, and called for Mr. Sleep to follow me down, something he did not particularly enjoy, not sharing my enthusiasm for small spaces. After he crawled out onto the concrete beam, however, I was glad he had squeezed down — since he was the one to notice that the chamber I was about to drop into had no obvious way to get back up. After a few minutes of discussion, he ascended to the surface and I went back to crawling, in search of another way down.

This was not long in arriving, in the form of a utility ladder that descended through a narrow cut in the grating. I followed it down one level, to discover that Mr. Sleep's advice had been very well taken — not only was there no way up out of

the chamber, but the floor itself was a thin plastic screen, totally incapable of holding my weight. Mentally praising the buddy system, I descended further, finding a bare utility chamber with dirt flooring. Crushing enough, however, it did not connect to the main building via any route we could follow. Time for Plan B.

Surprisingly enough, Plan B turned out to be easy. Admittedly, we were a bit surprised to see a jury-rigged ladder in front of the walled-off stairway — but it sure made climbing easier, even if it made us a touch more nervous. After descending down into the maintenance pit, we had to search for only a few moments before we found it: at the basement level, a metal panel had been removed, allowing access to the building itself.

"Do you think there are people in here?" I hissed to Mr. Sleep.

He rolled his eyes, said "yeah" and ducked his head to enter the building.

A building left to its own devices for a number of years can expect a fair amount of damage — but the hospital building was far, far worse than any structure I had ever seen. It was obvious that it had seen more than its fair share of wire strippers, homeless people and vandals, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. In many places, the ceiling had been partially torn down. Walls had been axed through. The floor was covered in inches of broken glass, shattered plastic housings and battered acoustic tiling. In one area of the basement, we found a thick steel

door which had a hole, several inches in diameter, punched directly through it.

This level of destruction was far beyond vandalism — it looked like a serious attempt had been made to destroy the building, from the inside out. This was due, to a large part, to the military's 1996 Operation Urban Warrior. A highly controversial urban warfare simulation that ranged all over the Bay Area, the operation was headquartered at the already-abandoned hospital complex of Oak Knoll. The building itself was stormed and stormed again, for practice exercises — and had been subjected to more than a few casual weapons and equipment tests, apparently. Only the military had the kind of toys that could do the type of damage we were seeing.

This, however, was not our primary concern while wading through the former prescription storage basement. We were much more concerned about the booming noise which echoed periodically through out the structure, startlingly loud in the forgotten space.

As we padded along the first floor, my brain kept calling up the phrase "drums... drums in the deep", from the eeriest portion of Lord of the Rings — despite the fact that the noises actually were coming from above us. Mr. Sleep and I were sure that there were other people in the hospital, after all, the ladder had given that away. What we couldn't figure out was what they were doing.

Caught between fear and excitement, I forgot to pay attention to where I was going, and managed to

trip over a piece of scrap metal, kicking it across the room, into a metal wall. It sounded like a gong being struck. Immediately, the hospital went dead silent. Mr. Sleep's glare could have killed, assuming I wasn't too embarrassed to meet it.

After a whispered conversation, we decided to continue on, despite that fact that I had announced our presence to the entire building. We worked our way through the debris to the nearest stairwell, and headed up, deciding to skip the middle stories and head straight for the roof. We made it up two floors before we bumped into the welcoming committee.

This was two homeless women, both looking surprisingly well for people living in ruins and asbestos. One wore a headlamp, and cheerfully asked if we were new neighbors, while the other glared and insisted on shining her flashlight directly into my eyes, as some sort of misguided attempt at self-defense. We mumbled "just passing through" and headed up another floor, only to bump into a man in a dust mask and headlamp, coated with a fine layer of white powder. He gave us a vague glare as we passed him on the stairs. Behind him, a gasoline-fuelled lantern cast a bright blue light, in which we could see a small family working to strip wire and piping from the walls, using hammers and crow-bars. That, at least, explained the booming noise. As we passed the level, I heard a language that sounded a bit like Spanish, except I could not understand a word of it.

A few levels up, we decided to

cut across to a different staircase, as the one we were on did not provide roof access. Again, we passed through scenes of destruction unparalleled in my exploring career.

We found the stairway after a few wrong turns, and continued on our way up. Near the top, we passed an older woman with a flashlight, giving her a cheerful "hello" as we headed up. Given her confused expression and her trashed appearance, it was immediately obvious that this woman had abused either crack or methamphetamines for some time. We were on the last level from the top when we heard her call out to us. I shrugged and headed back down, where she waited by the door. She looked embarrassed when I came down the stairs, and mumbled something like "thought you were someone else" and rushed off. As I headed back up, it occurred to me that in the few moments since we had passed her, she had replaced her flashlight with a candle gripped in her left hand, wax dripping across her fingers unnoticed.

As is usual for these sorts of situations, the roof could not be reached with stairs, but by a series of ladders from the top floor of the hospital up. What made the first one slightly unusual, however, was that the floor beneath it had been neatly cut away, leaving three stories worth of empty space just below. Swinging out onto the ladder was not particularly difficult, but the black empty beneath me made it much more nerve racking.

Two ladders later, we found ourselves standing on the gravel roof of the top level of the hospital. The lights

on the hills twinkled, while acres of darkness spread out beneath us. It was hard to believe that we were in one of the densest cities on the West Coast — civilization seemed miles away. It was a champagne sort of moment, but since we had neglected to bring any such thing, we settled for some self-congratulation, a sip of water and a few moment's rest before heading back down.

Our way out was much simpler, as we kept moving, responding to the occasional "who's there?" with a "just passing through" and a more rapid pace. Oddly enough, we were twice asked for cigarettes, but no one ever asked who we were or why we were there. I guess those questions don't apply as much to late night meetings in an abandoned hospital.

Near the maintenance pit, Mr. Sleep and I stepped aside to allow an elderly black man to enter the hospital. He passed us with a thank you, and as he paused to light his gas lantern, gave us a grin and asked "So you guys just trippin' or what?" We laughed, and said we were exploring, and then headed up the stairs, over the wall and on our way.

But outside, as the unreality of the hospital cleared in the night air, it seemed to me that perhaps he had been right — the entire experience had a hallucinogenic aspect to it. Maybe we had been tripping, after all. In the absolute quiet of 3 a.m. I looked back at the building, receding behind the trees. It looked as if it had been shutdown for the evening, and would reopen again tomorrow.

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Old South Pole Station

by Nicholas Johnson

THE MOST DIFFICULT ASPECT of getting into Old Pole is doing so without getting fired.

Built in 1957, the old station is now buried beneath several metres of snow, and its location distinguishable from all the other snow only by a handful of flags that mark the entrance, which is about 1.5km from the present station.

Finding the station is easy in the long bright summer, but that's also when it's easy for management to find you finding it, as you will be visible for miles, tromping around in the

flat icescape with nothing to hide behind. A (probably apocryphal) anecdote is told about a guy who tried to sneak out there by holding up a white sheet behind him as he walked, but was detected by his bootprints. And since there are people on shift around the clock, and everyone has big mouths, going to Old Pole in the summer is just something that's not done by anyone wanting to keep their jobs.

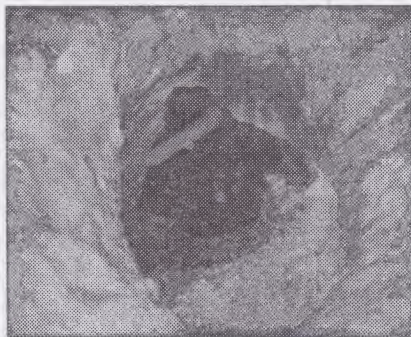
After all the planes had left for the winter and I found myself inventorying catheters in the Bio-Med storage closet and looking forward only to a leathery chicken-fried steak and a crossword puzzle at lunch, I asked myself why I came down here. Going to Old Pole, nearly impossible at any time other than during the winter, was the

one answer that brought fresh zest to my catheter-counting. One's immediate dismissal for even being found near Old Pole is one of the most emphatic reminders at employee orientations and, consequently, Old Pole is for many one of the more tantalizing reasons for spending the winter at Pole. Once the flights had stopped for

the winter, the station manager at an All-Hands Meeting once again barked emphatically that Old Pole is absolutely off-limits.

When the sun went down for the winter and it was pitch-black out most of the time, a few friends

and I began planning our trip to Old Pole. My friend who had done several winters was our guide, and briefed us on the tasks before us. The first thing to do was go find the entrance and dig it out, as snow would have been accumulating on it for the better part of a year. So after work one moonlit night, we hiked out to the Dark Sector Lab, an unfinished laboratory being constructed away from station. Like most other buildings on station, the Dark Sector Lab is heated, and like all other buildings on station, unlocked. (Vandalism and theft in the small community are so rare that dorm rooms don't have locks.) Here we took a half-hour break from the cold and drank some whiskey before setting out to look for Old Pole. Fortunately, one of the science experiments at



Digging a route down to the entrance.

Pole requires that ambient light from the station be minimized, so in the winter the windows are blocked with cardboard, meaning that no one can see those stumbling around in the moonlight outside looking for the forest of flags that marks Old Pole entrance. Our guide reminded us not to use flashlights for any reason, as the light would be visible for miles. We spread out and began walking across the uniform desert looking for clumps of flags. After about an hour of unsystematic wandering, with our boots frozen and our facemasks choked with ice, we found the entrance. We got out the shovels we'd been carrying in our backpacks and began digging, which was a welcome change from walking, in that it warmed up our core temps faster, but unwelcome in that at -60C contact with the shovel handles froze our hands through our mitts much faster than we could warm them up during short breaks. Fortunately, someone had put a large piece of plywood over the entrance sometime last summer, which meant we only had to dig down about half a metre, pull off the plywood, then get down in the cavity and dig about another meter until we hit a large manhole cover. We dug out the sides around the manhole cover, took a brief peek inside to reward ourselves for our work, replaced the plywood over the top so the entrance wouldn't refill with snow, left our shovels there, and headed back to the Dark Sector Lab because by now all our clothes were rock hard, our hands and feet were numb, and we were thirsty.

On the next moonlit night eight of us gathered after work, once again

hiked out to the Dark Sector Lab for a brief break, then set out for Old Pole, which was found much more quickly because we had more pairs of eyes looking for it. This time it only took us about 10 minutes to dig away the accumulated snow, we popped the cover, then headed down.

Once we dropped down through the manhole cover, we were free to use our headlamps. Though presently sealed up by this manhole cover, this used to be the main entrance, called The Holy Stairs in the 70s. The stairs have long since been covered with snow, so a rope has been rigged to assist climbing up and down the incline. (Though Old Pole is off-limits to the general resident, there are still many sanctioned reasons for maintaining the entrance, such as salvaging parts and tools; meters from weather consoles; and in one ambitious project, 10,000 gallons of diesel that was left in the fuel bladders.) When we had all slid down the stairs, we followed our guide along the wooden boardwalk that runs throughout the station to the bar, which made a good homebase. In the bar we took nips from a bottle of whiskey we'd brought along and chattered giddily, finally having achieved our forbidden goal, until one by one we dropped out of conversation and were silent in the room except for the sound of each of us poking at some curiosity. For a few minutes we pointed items out to each other: an Old Milwaukee poptop can in the sink behind the bar, the names of people we knew written on the wall and the dirty dishes of someone who must have enjoyed a rare sensation of eating a final meal here and then sim-

ply moving into the new Dome in 1975 with no reason to clean up.

But it was not long before we stopped talking to each other completely. At one end of the bar, a box of what were once surely prized real eggs were broken in the middle of the floor. A box of eggs can only get to Pole when there are planes in the summer. And even then, they are a treasured commodity, rationed and slavered over. Why were these eggs here in the middle of the floor? Had they frozen and been made inedible? Why the hell had they so recklessly allowed them to freeze?

A few days before we had come down here I had gotten in a furious debate with my friend. I'd mentioned something about taking pictures and he chastised me for even considering the idea. Besides the obvious concern over taking pictures that might identify someone as having visited Old Pole (one station manager was fired because a scientist had taken the manager's picture and recklessly posted it on his website), my friend considered this sacred ground. I responded that I didn't give a fuck what kind of ground it was, he should have known better than to invite a spiritual pornographer along, and that I would later go to Old Pole by myself if necessary to take photos. Our argument fizzled into a classic mutual "Whatever, fucker." As it turned out, the cold quickly sucked the juice from my two batteries (despite warm-

ing them up inside my gloves), and after I took a picture of the eggs on the floor, my camera was dead. At this point I warmed up to "Experience Overrules Documentation" mode.

We separated, wandering the labyrinth of the submerged station along the system of boardwalks. Walls had caved in and thick wooden beams had split from years of the increasing load of the accumulating



Wasted eggs inside the station.

snow up top. The tiny and dirty bunk rooms still had 70s Playboy pinups on the walls, and on the desks or floors or beds were a lone sock, a pencil, a fork, a beer can. The library floor was strewn with

old magazines and trade journals; the only books not scavenged over the years were dozens of bibles and religious self-help books and a few old Navy manuals.

After about an hour and a half, or when we began our collective acknowledgment of the business-end of hypothermia, we'd all regrouped in the bar. We grabbed our whiskey, now frozen a milky gold, and clomped back to The Holy Stairs, remembering to click off our headlamps before emerging through the manhole cover, replacing the plywood, packing our shovels and heading back to station where — and this was the most important and difficult part of the local operation — we didn't mention Old Pole to anyone.

Nicholas' book about his Antarctic adventures, Big Dead Place, is available online and in bookstores.



Metz and the Maginot Line: Underground Wonders of Eastern France

by Jim Hollison

THE CITY OF METZ is in the province of Lorraine, which, together with its neighbor Alsace, make up a region which has switched hands between Germany and France several times over the past few centuries. Due to this, there are numerous military defenses in this region, built by both the French and the Germans.

Metz is surrounded by three rings of forts. I should include some history of each, but unfortunately I am largely ignorant of their age and history,

being focused mostly on their design, layout and geography. The inner ring is comprised of only three forts, and is entirely within the urban area. With one exception, these three do not have any tunnels that I recall extending outside of the boundaries of each fort itself. However, they are large single units, and in many places, one can follow passageways along the edge of the moat for quite a ways.

The middle ring has a large number of forts, but for the most part they are smaller in size than those of either the inner or outer ring. One particularly noteworthy fort in this ring is the picturesque Fort de Plappeville, with

its courtyard at least twice as large as the largest of the other forts. Although this fort is mostly one long chain of rooms on three floors, if you look in the right place you will find a tunnel connecting to battlements out in the woods.

The outer ring around Metz is made up of not only forts, but fortified

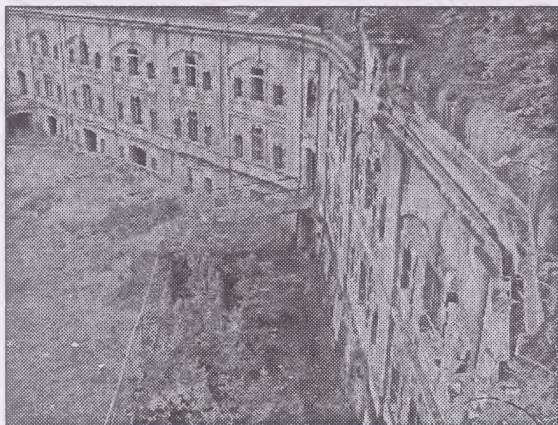
groups of bunkers. Most are comprised of anywhere from five to eight bunkers connected by tunnels, which at this time are hard to traverse.

The floors of

the tunnels are made up of cement blocks, underneath which a drain runs. Although these blocks appear thick and solid, many of them have been fractured somehow, making the tunnel traverse almost a climb, a slow careful walk at best. But, if you continue down a tunnel far enough, you will reach another bunker, with rooms and corridors leading to more tunnels.

German Bunkers in France

If you travel north of Metz about a dozen kilometers, you will reach the village of Thionville. Thionville was formerly known as Diedenhofen back



A typical eastern French fort façade.

when it was part of Germany, and it features three groups of forts built by the Germans.

Just north and east of Thionville lies the part of the Maginot line with the largest and most accessible abandoned bunkers. Of special interest are Soetrich and Metrich, both of which are large and wide open. These systems contain six to eight surface bunkers, connected by long

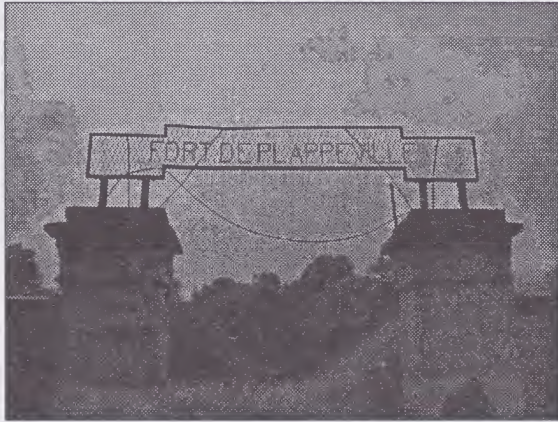
spiral staircases leading down 200-300 steps to wide tunnels, often with small rail tracks running down them. These tunnels are usually laid

out in a tree-branch pattern but are often more complex. Smaller side tunnels connect between the large ones, and connect to living quarters. Beyond and between Soetrich and Metrich lie many smaller bunkers. Most of these are accessible, but some are museums or privately owned.

Exploring the Metz Forts

After spending several weekends exploring the Maginot line forts, and having only had enough time to see a small fraction of the many forts shown on the map, I took advantage of a week-long vacation to stay in Metz and explore the surrounding forts to my satisfaction.

After checking into the hotel, I went up to the Mont-Saint-Quentin area, a fortified large hill with an abandoned fort at each end. After being unimpressed with my first fort, the next fort I visited, the nearby Fort de Plappeville, was very large and quite interesting. To enter this fort, you can walk right up the main front driveway past all the guardhouses and bastions. Coming up the hill, the first



The sign for Fort de Plappeville.

thing that meets the eye is a large courtyard with a three-storey building (one storey below ground level) forming a right angle on two sides of the court-

yard, at least one block long on the short side, two blocks long on the long side and an angular section in between. I walked the full length of the fort on a couple different floors, along corridors that ran behind the rooms facing the courtyard. There were only a couple of places where tunnels led on behind the fort, one ended at some large chambers and the other led past a series of rooms and then outside. However, a website had mentioned that there were 1.5 km of tunnels connecting the various parts of this fort. I was hoping to find them.

After looking around and finding only some basement rooms and short tunnels, I explored all of the

smaller buildings near the entrance but none of them led to tunnels either. Then, just as I was about to leave, I went down into the moat and found an entrance to a low tunnel hidden behind thick undergrowth. This was the last place I was expecting there to be an entrance because the enemy could have easily entered the moat. But the tunnel went onward, and soon forked. One fork led back up to

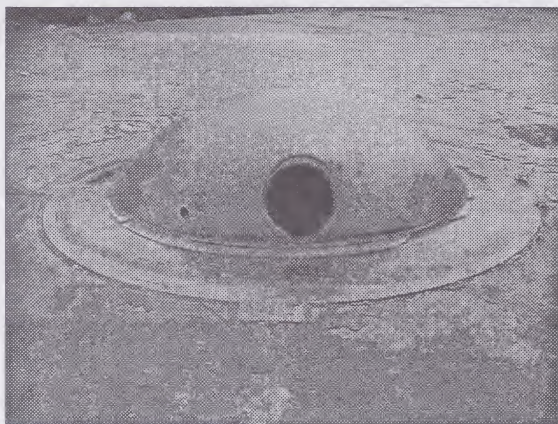
the main building and came out in a hole that I had overlooked, the other led on to some rooms full of hay that had obviously been the stables (in the tun-

nel?) and then on to some battlements. After exploring this area, I left the fort, and stopped at a two-room bunker along the entrance road. From here it was possible to climb down an equipment shaft to a tunnel, but it ended in both directions. Further down the road were two larger, identical bunkers, except that one was built in 1896 and the other 1897 (according to the dates engraved on top of the entrance). There was a tunnel between these and some long side passages leading to gun turrets, if this is part of what the website was referring to, the tunnels could easily total 1.5 kilometers.

The last fort I visited that day was Fort Gerardin, at the opposite end of

Mont St. Quentin. The entrance road lead through two gatehouses, then along the front of the fort. Since no door was in sight, I climbed in the window. Again, a corridor led off into the distance behind the long series of rooms. To the right, it ended in a series of rooms filled with artistic graffiti, to the left it led back to the main entrance corridor, which was large enough to drive through if the floor

hadn't been missing. I followed the entrance corridor back into the fort. It curved to the left, similar to the entrance gatehouses, and then emerged in



A typical gun turret inside a fort.

another courtyard. Another line of rooms with a corridor behind them, and the main passage ended at a wide spiral staircase leading down. Down the stairs, through a short tunnel, and up again, I emerged in a room on the outside of the moat. Tunnels led in both directions; they are symmetrical and both end in a long series of rooms.

The next day, I visited some of the fort complexes in a ring around Metz, connected by tunnels. The first one I stopped at was Groupe Fortifee Driant, on top of a wooded hill outside of Metz. The road to the fort led in a series of long zig-zags up the hill, passing the sign "Terrain Militaire, Defense d'Entrer," but with the words

" S a u f
marcheurs a
pied sur la
r o u t e "
(except for
pedestrians
on the road)
handwritten
below it. At
the top of
the hill the
road ceased
to zigzag
and headed
directly
toward the



*"Military Land, No Entry — except for pedestrians
on the road."*

main fort in the center of the complex. The main fort was a two-storey cement structure. Although all the entrances had been bricked off, I was able to climb through a large window and enter the fort. A corridor led off in both directions along the front of the fort, and countless rooms led off of it. One end of the fort had been severely bombed; the upper floor had collapsed leaving the lower floor basically a pile of rubble. Upstairs, the fort was similar to downstairs. A tunnel led around the back of the fort in a semicircle, with several small stairs leading to rooms off of it and a side tunnel leading back to two symmetrical outlying bunkers. At one corner of the main fort, a tunnel led off to a small caserne, from here another tunnel led to another small bunker, and then the same thing again until I reached a bunker that had no further tunnels. Most of the tunnels were in very poor condition, and I had to straddle the edges to walk along them. In several places, a whole section of bunker had been blown to bits. I left the last bunker and walked back

to the car. A quick stop at McDonald's, and off to the next fort across the river, following the outer circle of "groupes fortifiée" counter-clockwise around Metz. This

one was the Fortified Group of Verdun and unlike most of the others, it was made up of three large forts and no smaller bunkers. I soon found out that the main fort was still occupied and used by the army, but one a short ways away in the woods was abandoned and wide open. Walking across the moat and in through the woods, and even after arriving at a small bunker, at first the fort didn't look like much, but after looking around inside I soon found a tunnel leading off and then splitting. Both passages soon ended at small bunkers where you could go back outside. Back in the main rooms, there was another larger tunnel that was almost filled in, but there was enough room to climb past the rubble and continue downhill, up a spiral staircase, and into the main three-storey part of the fort. Each floor was basically a long series of rooms off of a front corridor with a series of wide windows. In places, the fort had been bombed, leaving gaping holes in the walls and floor. One of the two staircases had half a flight of stairs miss-

ing. Three or four short tunnels led off the bottom floor of this complex to spiral staircases with about 70 stairs each, each of which led to a tunnel with a



A fort near Verdun.

shorter spiral staircase at the end leading up to an outlying defensive bunker. I walked back through the woods from one of these and in a short distance was back in front of the first bunker. I continued on counter-clockwise around Metz to the next fort, Groupe Fortifée de l'Aisne. This one was being in the process of being restored, and tours were led through it once a month, but even so several of the doors were left unlocked. I didn't explore far because it was the middle of the day and I didn't want to run into one of the restoration people on the way out, but it certainly has potential for exploration. This complex consists of three large forts and two smaller bunkers connected by tunnels.

Several cars were parked on the disused road that ran in front of the next forts I stopped at, one of them probably belonged to explorers and another had a guy sleeping in it. In front of this fort was a large abandoned military camp with 20 buildings or so; I was considering stopping to explore it but a man who could have been an official was walking

back just inside the entrance. He was probably just another explorer because he didn't look back at me even after I sat in front of the entrance for a minute

with the engine idling.

I headed back into town, and after another quick stop at McDonald's headed up to Fort Belle Croix, close to downtown. After driving around for a few minutes around the apartment building neighborhood built on top of the fort, I found a series of gun-shooting windows along one of the battlements. One of them was barely wide enough to squeeze through. Indeed, a tunnel led alongside the windows, and soon a tunnel branched off downhill. Following this passage, numerous crawl tunnels began to appear. I climbed up one of them, it went for a short distance, then up, over, up and over again, then ended. It would be interesting to find out what this system was used for, maybe ammo storage in the crawl tunnels. Soon I found myself at a four-way junction, where I began to map out the system of tunnels. It took about two hours. While doing this, I ran into four creatures with reflective eyes in this system, the first three stared at me, shaking from fear, and the fourth ran off behind me after I got close. I am no expert at animals, but

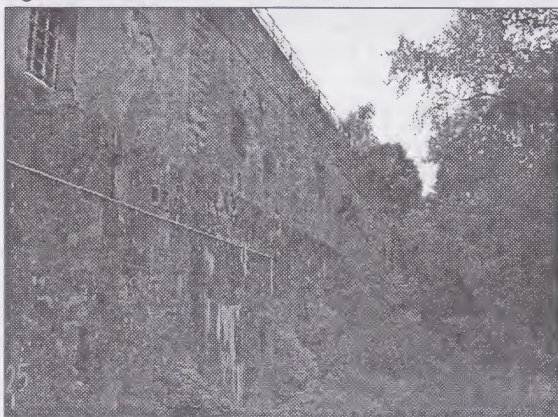
they were probably foxes. This tunnel system was quite an interesting labyrinth.

The next day, I visited several of the large fort complexes in and around Metz. The first one was Fortified Group of Jeanne d'Arc, just northeast of F.G. Driant which I had visited a few days before. A paved, one-lane road led through the woods to a two-storey puke-green abandoned building. Across from the

abandoned building was an overgrown trail leading downhill to a long, two-story bunker. The bunker had been abandoned much longer than the building. All

exits on the lower floor were closed, but a ladder led up to an open door on the second floor. Just inside was a pile of at least 100 yellow pages phone books, about 10 years old. Going back downstairs, I soon found a tunnel leading on to the next bunker, and began to draw a map of the tunnel system. There was a total of nine large bunkers, four smaller works, and three observatories — small rooms with a dome to look outside — that were connected by tunnels. Throughout the system, there were eight open entrances, most of which came out in the middle of the wilderness where you would need a GPS to find your way back. The tun-

nels were in fairly good condition, about a third of them required straddling the edges. One tunnel was bricked off, but there was enough room to climb underneath the wall. I didn't explore it. Another tunnel led to a locked door. I went outside through a bunker near this door and found myself right behind the puke-green administration building. Just over the hill were two more bunkers that had been much more recently used.



A bunker at Fortified Groupe Jeanne D'Arc.

Although most had been removed, there were still a few paintings and signs left. These bunkers had been used within the last 10 years and were still in

good condition, in contrast to the rest of the system which must have been abandoned at least 40 years ago.

Across the highway, I turned down a deserted, one-lane road that leads towards a line of larger bunkers. After driving through the woods on the road, which appeared to be completely disused, I ran into a large military truck with two soldiers inside. I asked them if it was alright to drive down there. They were very friendly and told me that it was a military route, but it was possible to go to the end of the road and turn around. Sure enough, at the beginning of the road was an old, battered sign proclaiming it to be a "Route Militaire." I

went back into town to eat. A couple hours later, I returned to a nearby group of forts, F.G. Frere de Guise, to check if they were abandoned and possibly visit them. There was a military complex on the road leading to the forts, and furthermore the road was well paved, but I continued onward and soon pulled up in front of one of the twin forts. The place was triple-gated, and a security camera was staring right at me. I turned around and headed back, and just as I arrived at the place where the road forks, a military truck came out of the other road and stopped right in front



A fox stares out from the Fort Belle Croix tunnels.

of me. Same soldiers that I had ran into before! Again, they were very friendly, but this time they wanted to know exactly where I wanted to go. He even said it in English. After I asked if it was possible to visit the forts, he said it wasn't sensible, and then left. They didn't even follow me out of the military zone.

Koenigsmacker and Beyond

One of the larger bunkers I explored was Soetrich, which has eight block-houses. The website says that this bunker was covered up by the army to prevent accidents, but an explorer from Paris said that he heard it was accessible. I first drove up to the

entrance of the bunker to check out accessibility. Indeed, the army did a very bad job at covering it up; there was plenty of room to crawl over the mound of dirt and then around the gate. I thought I heard footsteps coming from inside but dismissed it as water dripping, which can be found in almost all the bunkers. I then drove around to park in a less suspicious spot along the highway, and walked through the woods towards

the entrance. When I had arrived at the men's entrance, about halfway to the munitions entrance, I heard the scariest sound ahead. It

was like a combination of a dog barking and a very loud grotesque burp, very freaky. I ran back to the safety of the road and proceeded on to the next bunker.

A couple months afterwards, I went back to Soetrich and explored all of it without hearing any scary noises or seeing anything unexpected. Looking back on it, it's likely that there were people there doing something, but I have no idea what the noise was. Somebody suggested that it could've been a bullfrog. I don't know much about animals but it's amazing if they can be that loud.

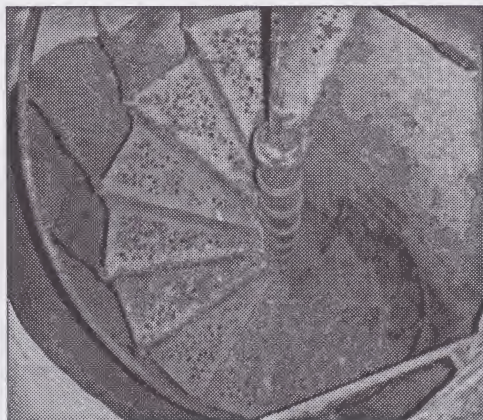
A few weeks after I had been scared away from Soetrich, a couple

friends and I came back to the Thionville area. Starting from a non-descript farm road, we walked up a long, overgrown trail towards one of three fortified complexes the Germans had built around Diedenhofen. After walking for quite a while and finding nothing but trenches and a couple grated pipes that led underground, I was disappointed in how little there was left. We decided to turn around and head back, but on the way out we went a short ways off

the trail and found an entrance leading straight into a two-storey underground building with several rooms and a large bathroom, apparently the living quarters. Following a long tunnel, we passed the other side of the grated pipes, and visited a large room like a boiler room. The floor was filled with water but it was possible to climb over it and up the ladder on the side of the "boiler", a large box that filled the entire room. Down the hall was the "usine", an underground factory where electricity was generated for the complex. It was a series of several rooms, one door led back outside. We found a staircase leading down to a tunnel that the German graffiti artists called Wasserstrasse, or Water Street, because of a couple inches of water in parts of the tunnel. Following this

tunnel for a couple blocks in one direction, we went up some stairs and found a small bunker. Another tunnel continued, but the floor was in very poor condition. Following the tunnel the other direction from the factory, we soon came to a four-way

intersection. I lit a candle to mark the way back, and we took the right fork. The graffiti artists called this one "Die Aryen Strasse". Soon we came to another junction and a stairs leading up. First we went upstairs, there were a



A typical spiral staircase inside a fort.

couple floors of rooms and one passage that led back outside. But that didn't help, we had no idea where we were outside and I didn't mark any previous locations with the GPS. We went back inside and took one of the other tunnels. This one lead steadily downhill, probably underneath the hillside, then suddenly went back upstairs into another bunker with two floors. This bunker had two long symmetrical wings. We went back to the fork and took the other passage, which lead to another similar bunker.

We went back out the way we came in and drove 3 km to the Maginot Line ouvrage of Metrich, the largest of the abandoned ones, with 12 blockhouses. We walked along the path to the entrance, passing a tent occupied by campers that didn't

notice us and then finding a smoldering fire right in front of the entrance. We followed the large, echoing entrance tunnel back past the magazine area, and pushed and rode one of the old carts along the railway until we ran into a place where the gypsum deposit had pushed up the floor almost halfway to the ceiling, hindering any further cart-riding. Soon we were at the caserne area, several large parallel galleries that were probably the living quarters

for most of the 800 men that the ouvrage was built for. The gas-powered generator area was next to the caserne, and so was the men's entrance, which had been covered up from the outside to prevent accidents. All that remained was one small crawl hole.

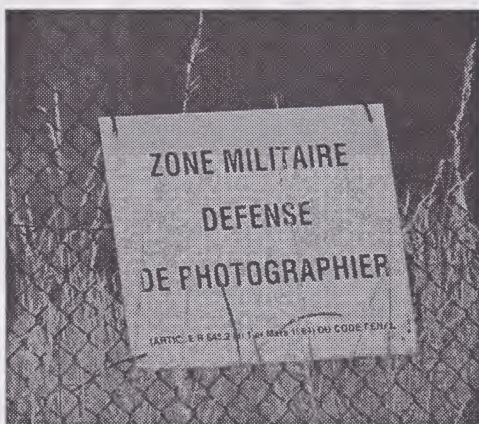
We followed the main tunnel further in to a staircase leading up to blockhouses 8 and 11. After going up countless flights of stairs we reached a point where the wall read "Attention, ca monte! 70 m!" Soon we reached what I thought was the top. The graffiti artists claimed there were 182 stairs, but I counted 192. One of us must be wrong. After looking around we found a staircase leading even farther up, probably about as much as the first one. At the top, in Bloc 11, we found that the

cranks and knobs on the equipment to move the gun still worked. But nothing seemed to be moving. After playing with the equipment for a while we went back downstairs. Along the stairs there were several doors leading to a narrow spiral

slide, we tossed rocks and pieces of metal down the slide which created a loud echoing roar and rhythmic banging at the places where the pieces of slide were joined together. It would've scared anybody else that

happened to be in the place at the time. I climbed in one of the doors and slid down one floor, but there wasn't enough room to fit comfortably. We went back downstairs and left. It was a long night.

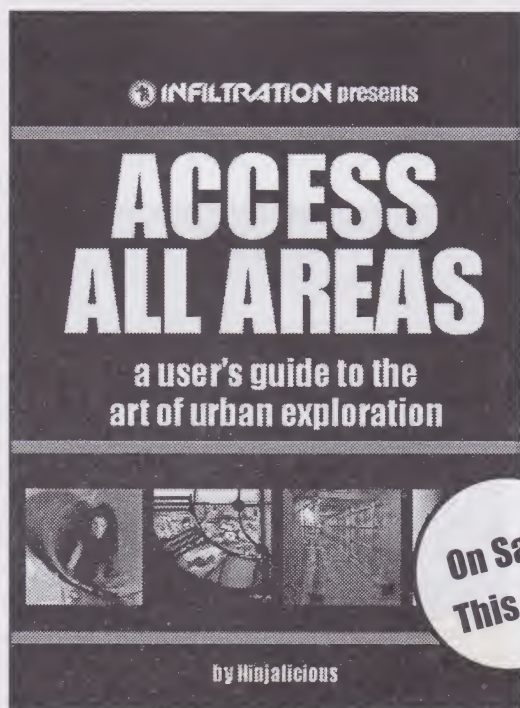
I came back to eastern France several times later that year, but left Europe before I would've had time to explore all of the accessible forts in the area. I plan on returning with a group of Americans this summer (2005), to revisit some of the most interesting forts that I have seen as well as hopefully checking out some that I haven't visited yet. Overall, the extent and diversity of the Metz area's underground sites is overwhelming, even to an explorer who has visited numerous similar sites in other parts of the world.



A typical warning sign near the forts.



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